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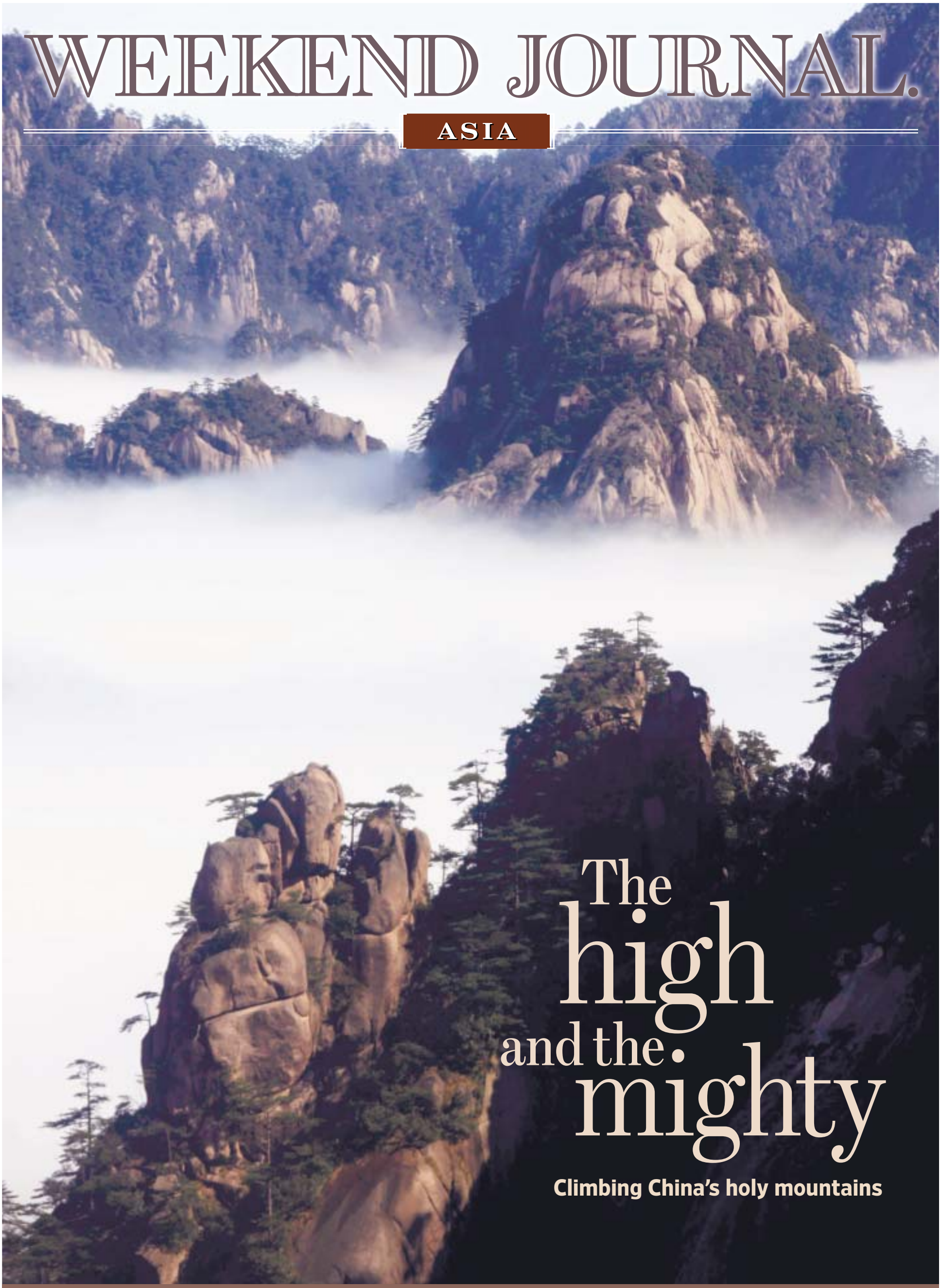

The high and the mighty

Climbing China's holy mountains

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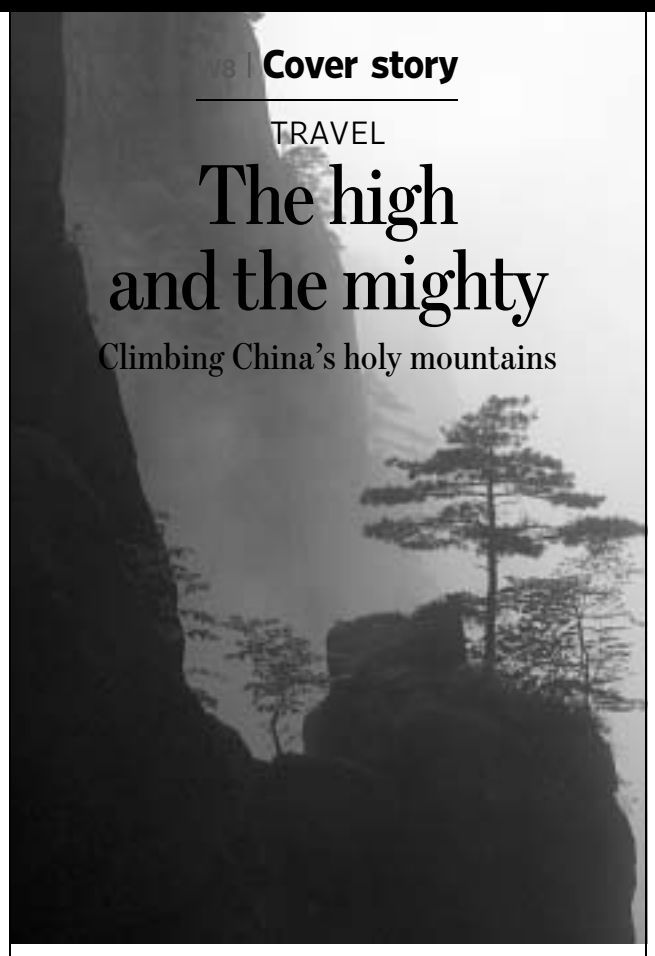

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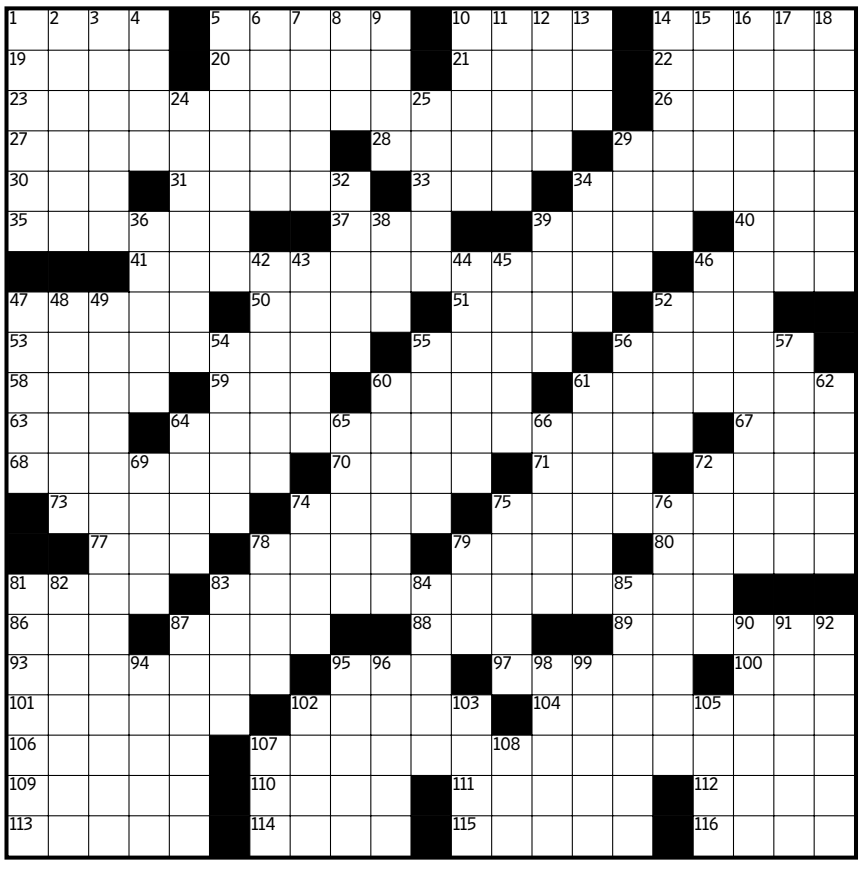
Your Mileage May Vary / by Myles Callum



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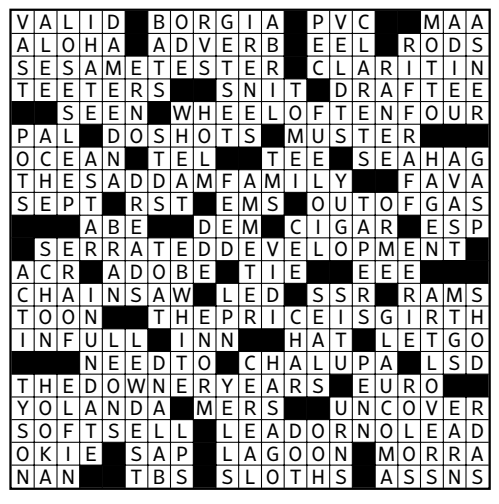

Southern comfort

Collectors from Latin America buoy Art Basel Miami Beach

By Kelly Crow

Miami

The global art market is gradually regaining its stride, as Chinese and Russian collectors return to buying art in auction hubs such as Hong Kong and London. Last weekend, the U.S.'s preeminent contemporary-art fair went looking south for its own economic salvation. With some Asian and European collectors skipping Art Basel Miami Beach and its 14 satellite fairs, Latin Americans emerged as the new power players.

In recent years, as the art market boomed, wealthy buyers from around the globe have traveled to Miami for work by contemporary artists from blue-chip mainstays to obscure youngsters. Now, while many collectors have scaled back their art spending, dealers discovered that Latin American collectors are still buying. Brazil's economy is thriving. Prominent members of the Venezuelan diaspora in Florida and Texas have oil fortunes. Many top contemporary collectors in Mexico, such as Eugenio Lopez, oversee manufacturing empires that make recession-resistant goods such as fruit juice.

Art Basel Miami Beach, hurt a year ago by global economic turmoil, needed an enthusiastic collecting force. In the end, attendance was about 42,000, up from 40,000 last year though down from 2007's 43,000, organizers say. And while a quarter of the 250-odd galleries that participated last year didn't return, says fair co-director Marc Spiegler, there were newcomers, including Faria Fabregas Galeria from Caracas.

The impact of Latin American buying power was clear on Dec. 2, when the five-day fair opened. Sperone Westwater Gallery quickly sold a painting by Argentine artist Guillermo Kuitca—whose watery diagrams of theater stages are part of a major retrospective at the Miami Art Museum—for $250,000. Two Brazilian galleries said they nearly sold out on opening day, thanks to Brazilian buyers.

"I've never seen so many of us here before," said Pedro Barbosa, a chemical engineer from São Paulo, "and we're buying."

Argentine collectors Juan Vergez and Patricia Pearson-Vergez, from Buenos Aires, spotted a $27,000 bubble-like balloon sculpture by Argentinian artist Tomas Saraceno in the booth of Copenhagen gallery Andersen's Contemporary. Instead of taking it home, they told the dealer they'd rather commission a similar sculpture at "double the size," Ms. Pearson-Vergez says. (The gallery said 40% of its fair sales were to Latin Americans.)

'Deseo' by Jorge Mayet, one of Art Basel's offsite projects, bobs in the sea off Miami Beach; right, 'Cervideo Hannya' by FLIP, at Graffiti Gone Global; below, 'Track Series Snakes' by Regina Silveira, sold for $20,000 at the satellite Art Miami fair.

Horrach Moya, Palma de Mallorca ('Deseo'); FLIP ('Cervideo'); Sperone Westwater, New York ('Snakes')

Art with a South American spin also fared well at Pulse, a satellite fair. Miami artist William Betts won a $30,000 commission from a collector to paint a larger version of his four-panel view of the Rio de Janeiro neighborhood of Ipanema, according to his dealer, Richard Levy.

Latin American collectors have long been accustomed to buying their own art stars, says Peter Boswell, senior curator at the Miami Art Museum. Art Basel's location in Miami appeals to wealthy Latin Americans who already travel there to shop or own second homes in the city, he said. Among the 100 museum groups that visited the fair were trustees from such Latin-American institutions as Peru's Museo de Arte de Lima and Brazil's Museu de Arte Moderna São Paulo.

Bolsa de Arte, a Brazilian gallery from Porto Alegre, joined the satellite Art Miami fair this year. Brazilians account for 80% of annual sales, says owner Marga Pasquale, and at the fair a Brazilian collector paid $20,000 for Regina Silveira's "Track Series Snakes," a maze-like strip of vinyl designed to look like motorcycle tire tracks.

It is unclear whether the Latin American effect was enough to significantly boost sales at Art Basel, which doesn't divulge overall sales figures. Anecdotally, dealers seemed relieved. The Marlborough Gallery had one of it strongest opening days, according to senior director David Robinson, selling two dozen artworks for about $2 million in total.

But overall, collectors are still taking more time with their purchases, and buyers routinely asked for—and received—20% discounts and perks like free shipping.

The satellite fairs tried various coping strategies. Pulse distributed a daily newsletter rather than print a catalog, saving about $17,000, organizers said. NADA, the fair run by the New Art Dealers Alliance, shortened its run by two days and moved to a smaller site.

Pulse added a strong performance-art component this year, with Colombian artist Maria-Jose Arjona's daily endurance tests, titled "Affirmations." One day she stood for hours on four glasses containing goldfish; the next, on a huge chunk of ice embedded with nails and knives.

Fair-goers strolling the beach near the W hotel raved about one of Art Basel's offsite art projects: "Deseo," a hut with a thatched roof that Cuban artist Jorge Mayet constructed to bob on the waves for the fair's duration.

Bolsa de Arte

'Untitled' by Guillermo Kuitca, at Art Basel

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A stylish savoir-faire

Books worth giving to anyone with a brain and a busy schedule

By Christina Binkley

Michal Czerwonka for The Wall Street Journal

A week after perusing Walker Lamond's "Rules for My Unborn Son," my son struggled to fasten a shirt button and growled, "I hate committing." This was actually a sign of progress—proof positive that he had absorbed one of the book's miniature philosophies: "If you choose to wear a tie, commit. Button your top button."

"Rules for My Unborn Son" is one of many style books that publishers have produced just in time for this season's gift-giving. Style books are a motley crew. Many offer stale fashion advice or strange recipes for make-your-own-beauty-products; one could fill an unfortunate library with books that analyze the style of celebrities. Like compendiums of sports bloopers and silly home videos, these books offer more comic relief than wisdom.

Still, after sifting through the 60-centimeter-high stacks of the latest style books on my desk, I've found a handful that I can recommend to anyone with a brain and a busy schedule.

Mr. Lamond's advice—offered as 210 pages of bons mots—will appeal to anyone who has observed that our culture is losing traditional standards of decorum and sensible behavior. This makes all the more apt such policies as "Don't pose with booze" and "Watch your language at the ballgame." The advice is often simultaneously wry and true: "If you attend a late-night after-party, have an exit strategy." And, by the way, "Nothing good ever happens after 3 a.m. I promise."

The idea that the author came up with the advice while awaiting his firstborn is an appealing gimmick. But it's common sense that makes this boat sail, even if you don't entirely agree that "socks are not necessary in the summer, no matter how formal the occasion." The author had me at "Call your mom." More importantly, the author reached the men in my life with, "There is exactly one place where it is acceptable to wear gym clothes." If my son and husband continue to take the advice to heart, this may be one book that actually has changed my life.

"The Gospel According to Coco Chanel," by Karen Karbo, is part self-help and part Chanel biography. A small volume with whimsical illustrations by Chesley McLaren, it looks like a trifle. Looks can be deceiving.

If you've seen the film "Coco Before Chanel," you'll have a sense of the nutty woman behind the interlocking Cs. We're in a period of Coco-worship, with a number of new books and films about her. But before you overdose, check out "The Gospel" for useful insights into some of the strategies and traits that made Ms. Chanel a mogul.

Ms. Karbo has salted in biographical material, without a bit of the syrupy reverence typically given Ms. Chanel. The book peters out at the end—as did Ms. Chanel's story. But the humorous commentary makes it all worthwhile. It explains, for instance, the rampant confusion about Ms. Chanel's origins—which stems from the fact that she lied a lot.

More to the point, the author offers takeaways for women who want to climb: Speak your mind, pay your debts and, of course, "it's always better to be slightly underdressed," Ms. Karbo suggests. The most important rule for success: "Be fun to be with," Ms. Karbo says.

Nina Garcia, author of "The Style Strategy," is a fashion-industry stalwart who graces the front rows of runway shows, looking both fashionable and un-frivolous. Given her well-known role as a judge on the show "Project Runway," it's likely publishers would print any drivel she wished to share. But Ms. Garcia has produced a well-grounded style manual—and possibly the first one to quote Goethe.

She argues for revamping the clothes in your closet, rather than chasing trends, and offers firm advice on buying clothes with fabric and construction that will make them worth making over.

Ms. Garcia suggests we save our money for our outer layers, whether coats or summer dresses, and spend less on other layers—which I take to mean I can continue buying layering T-shirts at U.S. discount retailer Target. She tips us off to buying tights at dance stores and offers useful online resources, from shopping to blogs to indie labels. Even as the modern fashion business presses us to buy, buy, buy, she writes: "It becomes clearer every day...that it is necessary to rein in our disposable lifestyle."

Mireille Guiliano is best known for frustrating women the world over with her book "French Women Don't Get Fat." But she is also a former chief executive who has worked in the LVMH luxury empire, so she knows her way around a boardroom—something few style advisers can boast. So when she says clothing "maketh the woman" in her new book, "Women, Work & the Art of Savoir Faire," her statement comes with a credible list of don'ts, such as "no sheer clothing or deep cleavage."

> 'Rules for My Unborn Son,' had me at 'Call your mom.'

There's wit about the war between the genders. "Women are said to be more emotional than men. Mostly true, I think, especially if you discount anger...." But this is a book by a woman for women, so there's also entertainment advice, with recipes such as "duck breasts with apples and chocolate sauce." Ms. Guiliano is a cross between mom and corporate coach—with, as always, a particularly French touch: "Sleep well," she says, and take plenty of vacations.

There are a few more style books that might not appeal to everyone but will thrill the interest groups they target. "The Teen Vogue Handbook" comes with a one-year subscription to Teen Vogue, which is either a plus or enough to scare a parent off, depending on your view. It's a road map—perhaps overly glowing—for the legions of teenagers who hope to enter the fashion business. It doesn't address anorexia in the modeling world or the difficulty many beginners have in getting paid for their work. But it does offer a textbook list of the types of jobs available and advice on how to get them.

It's fully illustrated with profiles of people working within fashion today—including half the staff of Teen Vogue. And there's a thorough and helpful list of design schools—from the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Visuels de la Cambre in Brussels to Drexel University in Philadelphia—which are where any aspiring fashion careerist should start.

Authors Hillary Kerr and Katherine Power know fashion, and their book, which shares the name of their style-advising business, "WhoWhatWear," offers enlightening insights. There's also a well-illustrated bit on runway styles that look outlandish on the catwalk but, with editing, can look terrific on the sidewalk. One note of caution: The book's corporate-dress advice goes awry. The authors suggest a strapless orange minidress is appropriate for a corporate cocktail party if worn with a jacket. Many executives would say otherwise.

"Harper's Bazaar Fabulous at Every Age" is, as billed, a "quick and easy guide to fashion." Its well-illustrated pages are laid out by decade of age. Thus the beach guide includes a page of advice for 60-somethings, complete with a photograph of actress Helen Mirren in a crimson bathing suit and snorkeling gear, and another page for 70-somethings. We all know it's easy to get dressed when you're 25, but it's positively uplifting to see so much smart advice on how to assemble a wardrobe, look great in pants, and buy the right dress when you're 40, or 50 or 75.

There's a good chance you've had enough of Michelle Obama's fashion. But if you're among those who want more, "Mrs. O: The Face of Fashion Democracy" is among the most thorough of the books on the First Lady and her wardrobe. Though sugary, the book features many photos that can provide helpful inspiration for working women. Its comprehensive exploration of Mrs. O's style, from her high-school-yearbook photos to the "Tonight Show" appearance and the Obamas' European tour, makes this book a trove for fashion historians.

Chanel's No. 1 fan

Fashion executive Andréa Bernholtz is obsessed with Coco

By Nancy Keates

Los Angeles

Andréa Bernholtz is obsessed with Coco Chanel.

The guest room of her 5,000-square-foot house in Marina del Rey is the "Chanel Suite," doused in the brand's signature colors of cream, white and black. The bed pillows are studded with Chanel pins, the armchair is upholstered in vintage Chanel scarves and the bathroom is stocked with Chanel products. Straddling the bed are matching framed black-and-white photos: one of Ms. Chanel; the other of Ms. Bernholtz dressed as Ms. Chanel for Halloween, sporting a Chanel bouclé jacket with vintage Chanel heels and pearls and a Chanel quilted handbag.

Ms. Chanel isn't just a design influence; she is a business inspiration for Ms. Bernholtz, the president of Rock & Republic, who is trying to transform her company into a global fashion brand amid the downturn. "She was versatile and traditional and timeless all at once," explains Ms. Bernholtz, clad in Rock & Republic jeans, a zebra-striped sweater and chunky gold bracelets that match her metallic fingernails. "I want our brand to be like that—one different generations can shop, so that a grandmother, a mother and a daughter can all walk in and find something they like."

Analysts say the economic downturn has hurt the super-premium jeans category that was Rock & Republic's forte. Christine Chen, an analyst at Needham & Co., says she thinks Rock & Republic is having a tough time this year in the U.S. and notes that she has recently seen "quite a lot" of the brand at apparel discounter T.J. Maxx. She adds that the brand's jeans designs haven't changed much in recent years.

Ms. Bernholtz says her company's products are "the most diverse in the marketplace" and this year alone the company released 38 new styles and more than 100 new washes for men and women. It also released a "recession collection" of lower-priced options. In recent years the company has expanded into cosmetics, accessories and shoes.

Ms. Bernholtz, who declines to divulge her age, has focused her efforts on global expansion, and says the brand's international sales were up 20% last year and that its products are sold at 38 new places in the Middle East, Asia and South America. Rock & Republic plans 10 new retail stores in 2010, including in Dubai, London and New York, and will move into lingerie, fragrances and pet accessories. As a result, Ms. Bernholtz says she now travels about 200 days a year.

On a recent Saturday, Ms. Bernholtz spent a rare afternoon at home, lounging with friends on a sofa on her rooftop, which features an outdoor fireplace, Jacuzzi, plasma TV and bar overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The topic was shoes: the new boots at Gucci, the Jimmy Choo flats at H&M. "She's able to take every piece of what she likes and somehow make it work," says Jaclyne Brander, owner of Southern California store Fred Segal Fun. "That's what Chanel did, too," adds Ms. Bernholtz.

It was Ms. Bernholtz's grandmothers—both kept Chanel clothes in the prime spot of their closets—who sparked her Chanel fixation. Though very different women, they both also wore Chanel No. 5 perfume.

A native of the San Fernando Valley, Ms. Bernholtz initially headed to the beach, skipping college and living in Maui for four years. In the 1990s, she met Rock & Republic founder Michael Ball when they were acting in commercials, and the two came up with various businesses together (sun block, a method for inking photos onto T-shirts, covers for pepper-spray containers). Rock & Republic was born in 2002 when Mr. Ball made a pair of jeans for his then-girlfriend.

Rock & Republic wasn't the first company to come out with expensive skinny jeans. But it was among the first to give them a rock-'n'-roll feel. Ms. Bernholtz's marketing ploy was to create a black-tie fashion show with the vibe of a nightclub, packed with celebrities and featuring the Pretenders, with Chrissie Hynde wearing R&R jeans.

As she travels, Ms. Bernholtz collects more Chanel paraphernalia. She knows the top boutiques that carry vintage Chanel in cities such as Paris and Düsseldorf, and her "Chanel fairy"—an employee at the Chanel store in Las Vegas—is always sending her new finds. And while much of her home was redone to resemble her favorite hotels (the rooftop was inspired by the Los Angeles Four Seasons, where she lived while her house was renovated), the most notable feature of the house is all her Chanel-inspired decor.

Scattered throughout the interior and mixed in with her skull candles, skull-emblazoned pillows and black-and-white zebra-striped carpets are four limited-edition Chanel surfboards; Chanel gym bags are hung next to her gym equipment in the basement; and there are enormous framed posters of Chanel images. Ms. Bernholtz has a collection of Chanel sneakers, and opted for a special package on her black Bentley because its quilted interior reminded her of the quilting on Chanel bags.

Ground Zero is her leopard skin-carpeted walk-in closet. About two-thirds of the clothing is black and white, and there is every Chanel item imaginable: hats, bags, perfume, luggage tags, shoes, scarves, tracksuits, sweatbands and even suspenders. "I like to have fun with the brand," she says.

Joe Schmelzer

Coco Chanel 'was versatile and traditional and timeless,' says Andréa Bernholtz.

Ms. Bernholtz has a 'Chanel fairy' who sends her new finds.

Arbitrage

Christian Dior lady's wallet

Christian Dior

City	Currency	US$
New York		$574
London	£360	$585
Paris	€400	$589
Rome	€420	$619
Brussels	€445	$656
Hong Kong	HK$5,100	$658
Kuala Lumpur	2,260 ringgit	$664
Bangkok	23,000 baht	$693
Singapore	S$980	$703
Jakarta	7.3 million rupiah	$774
Shanghai	5,500 yuan	$805

Prices, including taxes, as provided by centrally located retailers in each city, averaged and converted to the nearest U.S. dollar

The best spot from which to observe the skittish population of the Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary is an observation tower.

One hour out: New Delhi

See blackbucks roam without leaving town

By Ketaki Gokhale

Delhi has more than its share of quaint parks, but even in the largest of them, the signs of the city are ever present—whether it's a couple necking in the shadows of a Mogul-era tomb or the distant hubbub of street hawkers and auto rickshaws. I am in the mood to get away, and the largest green patch on my city map is labeled "Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary." I hire a taxi and strike out early one morning, just a little after sunrise.

My research tells me it's a 2,750-hectare preserve and one of very few sanctuaries in India that's inside a metropolitan boundary—yet, there's not a mention in my guidebook, and the driver, in fact, doesn't seem to know the way.

We pass the ramparts of the 700-year-old Tughluqabad Fort, silhouetted against the pink sky, and I grow convinced that early morning is the best time to see the sights. Then, equally suddenly, we are plunged into a dark, pothole-filled street, lined with splashes of fuschia bougainvillea flowers.

What should have been a 25-minute drive turns into 40, including a stop for the driver to ask directions from some loitering teenagers. Finally we pull up at the gates of the preserve. They stand partly open, but when I try to squeeze through, a sleepy-looking guard emerges from the trees.

Another in a series of articles seeking to answer the question, When a traveler has had about enough of the jingle-jangle of the urban jungle, can relief be just an hour away?

He tells me that the guides won't arrive until 9 a.m., when the park officially opens. And while he adds that I'm welcome to wander through on my own now, he cautions, "Only go out one kilometer, though. It's not safe at this time." Some foreign tourists had been roughed up just a week before. He says the east side of the park, bordering the state of Haryana, is crawling with *junglee* types—rough, unscrupulous sorts out to cause trouble, from stealing lemons to poaching the park's precious blackbucks, a species of antelope native to South Asia.

Breakfast at Claridges Hotel sounds like a better option. It's sumptuous—with four types of fresh-squeezed juice, cold cuts and miniature *lassis*—but at the same time entirely inappropriate, given my plans for a wilderness adventure.

When I return, Ishtyaque Ahmad, education officer for the park, is there waiting. A lanky man with a purposeful stride, Mr. Ahmad leads the way—pointing out a plant known locally as Mexican *kikar*, a invasive shrub native to Mexico and South America that now grows rampantly all over Delhi, and the *ber* bush, a native plant with edible fruit and many medicinal properties.

The purpose of the sanctuary, which was established by the Indian government in 1986, is to preserve the ecological heritage of the Aravalli hill range in which it's nestled. It's an area renowned for its biodiversity, Mr. Ahmad proudly points out, though all we've seen so far are some struggling plants and a camel, a bell around its neck, grazing forlornly.

But then I follow him up the rickety wooden staircase leading to one of the park's main watchtowers. From that vantage point, looking out over the expanse of scrubby bushes, dry grass and stubborn little trees,

Clockwise from left, the non-wild life at the Asola Bhatti sanctuary includes this grazing camel; Ishtyaque Ahmad, education officer at the sanctuary; some of the 126 blackbucks, descendants of 10 animals introduced in 1986.

Sanjit Das for The Wall Street Journal

we finally get our first fleeting glimpse of the male blackbuck. Its head high, regal horns twisting aggressively out behind it, the black and dun animal darts out of a grove of trees. It looks breathtakingly mythical, as if stepping out from a stylized Mogul hunt scene, and for the moment I am transported.

The blackbuck does in fact have a place in Hindu mythology. Chandrama, the moon goddess, is said to ride one of these lithe animals as she traverses the night sky, and herds of blackbucks are supposed to bring prosperity wherever they roam.

In 1972, when the count of blackbucks in India dipped dangerously low, the government declared it a protected animal. And protected it certainly is. In recent years one of India's biggest Bollywood stars, Salman Khan, spent some days in jail over charges he poached two blackbucks and several *chinkaras*, a species of gazelle.

There are 126 blackbucks in Asola, descendants of 10 animals brought to the sanctuary from the sweeping deserts of Rajasthan in 1986. The blackbuck herds that originally populated the region south of Delhi were long extinct. Mr. Ahmad points to the tall mesh fence marking their 15-square-kilometer enclosure within the enclosed sanctuary.

"We have that to protect them," he says. "Otherwise, people here would hunt them for their flesh and antlers."

There are 26 males, but only one alpha male, around whom the entire flock of females is centered. During the mating season, early in the monsoons, young bucks will lock antlers with the leader to challenge his ascendancy. But for now, during the quiet and dry summer months, there's an air of sleepy contentment. Even Mr. Ahmad, who sees them every day, is willing to spend half an hour with me, watching the animals roam and graze.

The sanctuary is home to other animals, too, Mr. Ahmad says—among them mongooses, civet cats, buffaloes, porcupines and some 200 species of bird. He points out a peacock strutting through the dry deciduous forest and a giant red anthill in the middle of a clearing. A fat caterpillar falls on my head, making me scream and feel like a bit of a city slicker—especially given that Mr. Ahmad is absorbed in identifying birds by their fallen tail feathers. (The caterpillar, with luck, will someday emerge from its chrysallis as a black swallowtail butterfly.)

Only a couple of hundred visitors come to the park each week—mostly locals and schoolchildren on class trips. The entrance fee, about $1 for Indian nationals and more than $6 for foreigners, doesn't seem to be generating the funds to renovate the park's dilapidated education center and ticket office. But there's no place Mr. Ahmad would rather be. "I could spend my whole life here," he says as his eyes sweep lovingly over the parched hills.

And frankly, when I get beyond certain incongruities and strange eyesores—like a leaky tractor abandoned at the park's entrance—I, too, see the appeal of Asola: its struggle for existence at the edge of a teeming metropolis, and its small, hidden beauties.

As we make our way back to the city, I look at my watch and realize it's not even noon. I haven't traveled far or long, but I've been worlds away.

Ketaki Gokhale, a former Delhi resident, is now a writer based in San Francisco.

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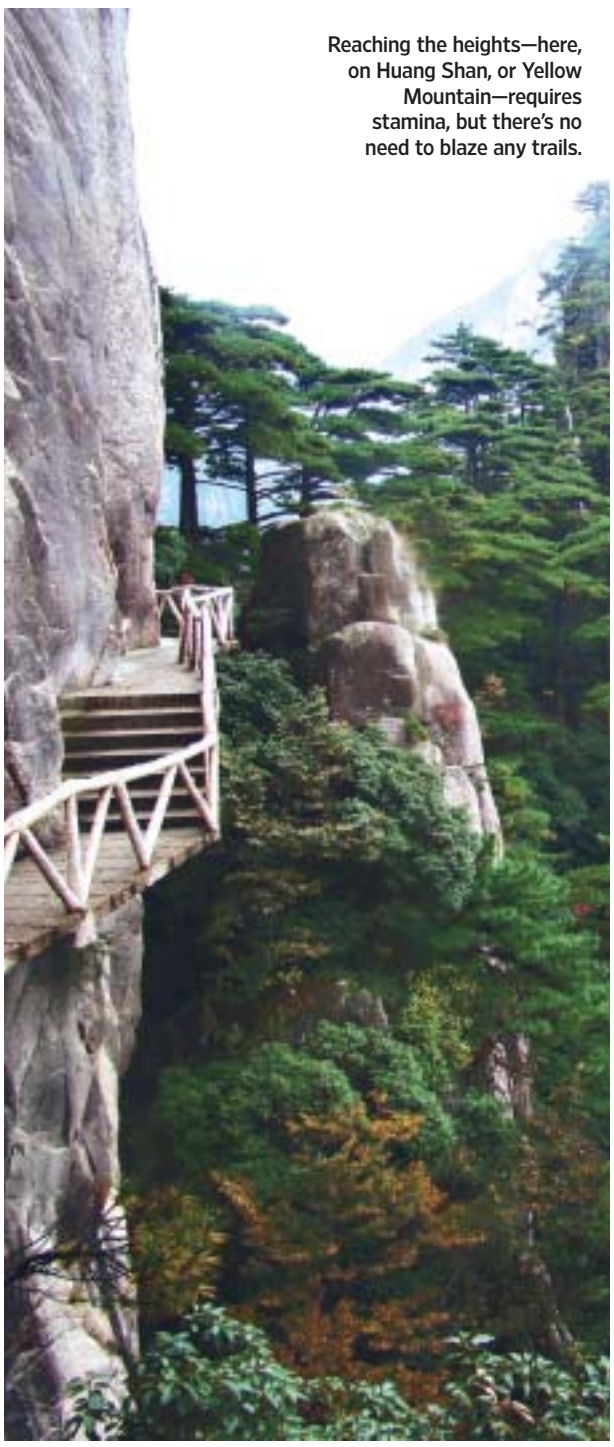
The high and the

By Stan Sesser



Reaching the heights—here, on Huang Shan, or Yellow Mountain—requires stamina, but there's no need to blaze any trails.

Qiyun Shan, China

The Taoist gods have finally brought good fortune to Wang Meihong.

Since the death of her husband in 1995, Ms. Wang—the sole support of 17-year-old twins and a blind 19-year-old son—has earned her living as a porter, climbing the steep slopes of this sacred Taoist mountain with canisters of cooking gas, cases of bottled water and other impossibly heavy loads slung from a bamboo pole balanced across her shoulders. Her dream: to earn enough money to send the twins, a boy and a girl, to college.

Last year a local newspaper reporter wrote about Ms. Wang, a human-interest story that quickly spread around China and brought TV crews to Qiyun Shan ("shan" means mountain), about 200 kilometers west of Shanghai in impoverished Anhui province. Now the 44-year-old Ms. Wang is a tourist attraction herself, and visitors to Qiyun Shan want to meet her as well as to pray to the Taoist gods. She says that their donations are going to make her dream come true.

Because the Chinese consider mountains the ideal spot for prayer, meditation and inspiration, thousands of dreams are being pursued across China on mountains considered sacred by Buddhists or Taoists. The lines of climbing pilgrims, plus ordinary Chinese seeking divine blessings for their lives, provide a dramatic, little-known counterpoint to the relentless pursuit of materialism and modernity in the country's big cities.

While China is bedeviled by pollution, these mountains feature clean air, clear water, and preservationist traditions that keep the temples and ancient villages from being overrun by developers. And while the Chinese government views some religious movements as a threat and attempts to suppress them, it allows Taoist and Buddhist worshipers to visit the sacred mountains without interference, and has even rebuilt mountain temples destroyed during the decade-long Cultural Revolution that began in 1966.

For foreign visitors, China's holy mountains are that rarity, a tourist highlight that has remained largely unchanged over the decades. It's the sort of adventure tourism that once made all of China an intimidating destination for foreigners: little or no English spoken, hotels that often provide considerably less than five-star accommodations, and unfamiliar food that reflects local preferences. There's a relatively new obstacle also: the crowds of Chinese tourists who have discovered the delights of their own country, and pack the sacred mountains on holidays and weekends.

Getting to Anhui, though, is as easy as hopping on the daily one-hour flight from Shanghai to the town of Tunxi, the gateway to three spectacular mountain ranges. One, Qiyun Shan ("cloudy high mountain"), is Taoist; the second, Jiuhua Shan ("nine glorious mountains"), is Buddhist; and the third, Huang Shan ("yellow mountain," as it is commonly called in English), while not technically a holy mountain, is the most spiritual of them all. Its soaring granite peaks poking through the clouds provide an inspiration for countless Chinese brushstroke paintings. Many Chinese maintain that it is the most beautiful mountain in the country.

The path up to a pagoda on Jiuhua Shan, a Buddhist mountain

The three mountains aren't pristine. All paths and steps are paved with stone slabs—a Herculean construction job—and the serenity is intruded upon by cable cars. The cars do save hours of arduous climbing, though there's still plenty of up-and-down hiking awaiting even the laziest tourist, since few of the temples are close to the cable-car stops.

Most foreigners, particularly Westerners, haven't yet discovered Anhui Province, which is largely rural; I saw none at Qiyyn Shan or Jiuhua Shan and only a handful at Yellow Mountain. Jiuhua Shan, made famous by an eighth-century Korean monk believed to have meditated there for 75 years, does draw a lot of Koreans.

Taoist Qiyun Shan, my first destination, has the virtue of being relatively uncrowded, with no lines to visit the temples. Surprisingly for a province where work isn't plentiful, Qiyun Shan was the only one of the three mountains to have local guides, who wait at the cable car stop and can accompany you all day for less than $10. None speak English,

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mighty

Climbing China's holy mountains

Of the three mountains, Huang Shan is the one not considered holy, though it is widely regarded as China's most beautiful.

Stan Sesser/The Wall Street Journal

Trip planner

Getting there
The three Anhui mountains are all accessible from the gateway city of Tunxi, which is sometimes called Huangshan City. Shanghai Airlines has an hour-long flight leaving a 8:30 every night from Shanghai's Pudong Airport. The fare is about $90 each way.

Qiyun Taoist Mountain
Because the plane arrives late at night, it's best to stay in Tunxi. Huashan Hotel, at the entrance to the old city, is a fine choice; each room has a computer with free Internet and there's a big breakfast buffet (3 Yanan Rd., ☎ 86-559-232-8888; around $55). The next morning, hire a taxi to take you to a hotel in the ancient village of Xidi, where you can drop off your luggage, then on to Qiyun Shan. My taxi charged 150 yuan (about $22). After spending the day seeing Qiyun Shan, you can take a taxi back to Xidi to sleep. While there are many small Xidi hotels, the only high-end accommodation I saw was the upstairs suite (two bedrooms, two baths and a sitting room) at Pig's Heaven Inn (☎ 86-559-515-4555 or ☎ 86-138-55-906765, zhulanjiuba@vip.sina.com; $110. Book well in advance.)

Jiuhua Buddhist Mountain
Because Jiuhua Shan is the longest distance from Tunxi or Xidi, about a two-hour ride, and because it's the least of the three mountains (though still worth visiting), this is the one to skip if you time for just two.

We arranged for a van to take us from Xidi to the mountain's little town, called Jiuhua Jie, for $100. In Jiuhua Jie, the Longquan Hotel is modest with small rooms, but clean and modern (☎ 86-566-328-8888; $50). One restaurant in the town, Zeng Fu Ying, is so good it's almost worth the trip itself (☎ 86-566-283-3477; about $15 a person).

Yellow Mountain (Huang Shan)
Buses go between the ticket office at Jiuhua Shan and Tangkou, the gateway city to Yellow Mountain. From Tangkou, there are shuttle buses to the Yungu cable car, which takes you up the mountain. Alternatively, you can negotiate with a taxi in Jiuhua Jie to drive you directly to the cable car, about a 90-minute ride. (If you've skipped Jiuhua Shan, it's only a 45-minute taxi ride from Xidi to Huang Shan.) At the top of the cable car, porters will meet you to carry your luggage on the 20-minute walk to Beihei Hotel, a four-star hotel whose rooms are slightly shabby, but which offers an ATM and a surprisingly good buffet dinner (☎ 86-559-558-2555, $188).

Stan Sesser/The Wall Street Journal

Clockwise from top left, Huang Shan, the inspiration for countless paintings; a bell on Juihua Shan; temples on Qiyun Shan, a Taoist mountain

but even if you come without an interpreter they're a valuable resource, directing you to the most scenic spots and interesting temples. Our guide took my interpreter and me to her home in Qiyun Shan's village of old stone houses, where she cooked us lunch and served it on an outdoor terrace. We dined on bamboo shoots, edible flowers, green vegetables and eggs scrambled with tea leaves, all grown on the mountain.

A Taoist mountain offers temples with colorful statues of Taoist gods, some with fierce demeanors; the god of medicine and god of pregnancy are among those that attract many prayers. But wishes can also be granted by touch. Carved into the sandstone of one mountain wall is a big Chinese character meaning "longevity" that has developed a worn spot over the centuries—according to Taoist tradition, those who rub the character will live to be 100. Elsewhere is the carved head of a turtle that grants a companion gift, freeing those who touch it from worries until old age.

One of the things that makes Qiyun Shan so attractive isn't on the mountain at all; it's the ancient village of Xidi, a close enough taxi ride so that you can spend the night. Some of its gray-tile-roofed stone dwellings date back 900 years, and it's unmarred by modern buildings—a piece of good fortune that the inhabitants attribute not to any zoning code, but to the fact that the area is too impoverished to have attracted new development.

Xidi is now a World Heritage site with 40 tiny hotels and hostels, most of them spartan. We stayed at Pig's Heaven Inn, which opened last December and has been given an English name despite the fact that the family that owns it doesn't speak a word of English. They've taken the top floor of their 400-year-old family home and, without disturbing the stone walls, wood-beamed ceilings or wood-plank floors, made it new-age. The two bedrooms have modern attached bathrooms with powerful heat lamps in the ceilings, and the big living room separating the two bedrooms is equipped with a high-speed Internet connection. This entire suite can be rented for $110 a night.

After Qiyun Shan, the Buddhist mountain of Jiuhua Shan initially seemed much too commercial. You arrive by taxi or bus in a modern town at the foot of the mountain that, except for the presence of Buddhist temples and monks walking down the street, resembles a ski resort of tourist shops, restaurants and hotels. Can this be a holy mountain? It proved its worth the next day after we took the cable car to the top, where we walked up and down forested slopes for several hours visiting isolated Buddhist temples. Many had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution but were reconstructed to duplicate the original; the rebuilding was so skillful it's difficult to tell the old temples from the new.

But the best was the last: the breathtaking Yellow Mountain. Even my interpreter, who knows China very well, was befuddled by the logistics of getting there, and my Lonely Planet guidebook was little help. The gateway town of Tangkou with its filthy, dilapidated hotels is such a dump that you'll want to flee at first glance. A shuttle bus from Tangkou takes you part way up the mountain to the cable car entrance, where the hotels are only slightly more pleasant. The Chinese tourists we spoke with recommended staying on top of the mountain. But because the hotels are at least a 20-minute walk from the cable car station, up and down steep flights of stone stairs, they also recommended we check our suitcases at the cable-car entrance and take only a light backpack of necessities.

Being without most of my clothes on an 1,800-meter mountain where sudden rains and freezing temperatures are common was hardly the advice I wanted to hear. And it turned out not to be necessary. For $15, a porter at the top strapped our luggage to a bamboo pole, covered it with plastic sheeting to protect it from the mist, and led the way to the four-star Beihei Hotel. Remarkably, this big, fully equipped hotel was built entirely from materials carried to the site by porters. Every grain of rice and chunk of meat at the buffet dinner had arrived on someone's shoulder.

Yellow Mountain is surely one of the most beautiful spots on Earth, and a photographer's delight. The jagged granite peaks, whose shapes have inspired such fanciful names as "Monkey Watching the Sea" and "Double Cats Catching the Mice," are constantly playing tag with fluffy white clouds, which move in on a moment's notice, envelop the peak, then just as suddenly disappear. Sprouting from the granite, with seemingly no soil to nourish them, are pines and other trees, their branches bent into artistic shapes by the constant winds.

A day on Yellow Mountain means hiking up and down thousands of stone stairs, to the bottom of its Grand Canyon and to the tops of a dozen or more peaks. It's an incentive to get into shape beforehand, because the more you're able to climb, the more you'll get to see. At one point, ascending hundreds of stairs to a particularly high peak, I passed a young Chinese couple, and the woman asked me in halting English how old I was. My interpreter, who was behind them, recounted their subsequent conversation in Chinese. First the man berated the woman for not being able to keep up with someone several decades older. "I know why," the woman replied. "He's a foreigner, and foreigners are strong because they eat lots of beef."

A vintner's own

The happy surprises of grower Champagne

By Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

Judd Pilossof for The Wall Street Journal

It's not very secret anymore, but on the label of every bottle of Champagne—real Champagne, from France—is a number in tiny type preceded by a couple of letters.

The letters you will see most often are NM, which means it's a *negociant* wine, made by the large Champagne houses that dominate the region. Sometimes, though, you will see RM, which means it's a grower's own wine, made with his or her own grapes. (You might also sometimes see CM, which means it is a cooperative's wine.)

There are about 5,000 grower Champagnes, though many are produced in tiny quantities and only a small number are exported. Back when we first wrote a column about them in 2002, this concept was not well-known. Since then, grower Champagnes have become quite popular among those in the know and a few names, such as Egly-Ouriet and Pierre Peters, have become pretty famous. Since 2000, shipments of grower Champagnes have almost doubled while total Champagne sales have slumped more than 10%. Grower Champagnes now account for more than 3% of total shipments.

Grower Champagnes don't necessarily have minute production—Pierre Peters produces more than 13,000 cases a year, for instance—but they generally are small. That means any specific label is always hard to find, but there are quite a few RM Champagnes out there.

In the past, we have found that grower Champagnes are interesting, personal and distinctive, and tend to be good values. That doesn't mean they are all winners. Some people today feel that small-production wines, made by individual, committed winemakers, are always good, which is adorable but sometimes wrong. Small producers are just as capable of making bad wine as big producers and, in fact, some simply don't have the capital to provide the essentials, such as great fruit and aggressive sanitation.

We've always been impressed by how consistently pleasurable the big-name Champagnes have remained over the years. If you want a safe bet for a widely available, nonvintage Champagne during this holiday season, any one of the three Heidsiecks (Piper, Charles and Heidsieck & Co.) are hard to beat. In addition, our guess is that there will be tremendous bargains on the big names as we get closer to the holidays and competition ramps up. There is an awful lot of Champagne sloshing around the world. It's not just that the recession has put a hit on sales, but that, at the same time, there have never been so many good, less-expensive bubbly alternatives on shelves, from Spain's Cava to Italy's soft Prosecco. The U.S. now produces a huge amount of consistent, often well-priced bubbly.

All that said, there is, of course, something special about Champagne—and, we have found in the past, something extra-special about grower Champagne. Because we hadn't conducted a blind tasting in seven years and they had grown more popular in the meantime, we wondered if RMs have been compromised. Just in time for the holidays, we decided to find out by conducting a broad blind tasting.

While few stores carry many grower Champagnes, we shopped widely and had no trouble putting together a big tasting. Most cost between $40 and $60, though a few cost less than $30 and a handful cost more than $70.

We can rarely remember a more fascinating tasting. Some of the wines were unimpressive—simply blah, without enough taste or personality. Most were good, with a wide variety of tastes, from floral to earthy mushrooms. There was plenty of personality and they offered more complex tastes than the big names. As Dottie said at one point, "If you're opening a Champagne for your mother-in-law, unless she really loves wine, go with a Heidsieck. These are too different."

Our favorites, however, showed why it's worth the search. Yes, they had all of that classic Champagne stuff—the beautiful bubbles, the golden color, the mouthwatering acidity, good yeastiness and a long, smile-evoking finish. But they had something more: individuality. They were pleasant to drink in all the right Champagne ways, but they were also wines that deserved to be noticed, talked about and truly tasted.

In fact, in our tasting, one wine rated Delicious and one rated a rare Delicious! The Delicious wine was José Dhondt Blanc de Blancs, which cost $51.99 and prompted John, after a single sip, to say, "Now this is Champagne."

The rare Delicious! wine—that is, a wine that is not only tasty but truly exciting—was Roger Coulon. It cost $49.99 and we declared it "flawless." This is the kind of wine you could give to or serve to a wine lover and have a friend for life. Interestingly, the wine is 50% Pinot Meunier, 25% Pinot Noir and 25% Chardonnay. In most Champagne, Pinot Meunier is a junior partner. It's just one more example of the individuality of these wines. Try one. It's fun to drink art.

The Dow Jones Grower Champagne Index

In a broad blind tasting of grower Champagnes—the ones with the little RM on the label—these were our favorites. All of these are nonvintage except as noted, and all are Brut. By definition, these are produced in small quantities, and it's impossible to know which you might see where. What's important is that grower Champagnes, in general, are hot right now and you are likely to find at least one at good wine stores. The prices listed are what we paid, but prices are all over the map on these.

Roger Coulon 'Tradition' Premier Cru. $49.99. Delicious! **Best of tasting.** Starts out pleasant, with some cookies and almonds on the nose, and then after a few minutes—pow. All the tastes meld into an absolutely beautiful, sophisticated whole with a finish that lasts and lasts. "Not a misstep," Dottie said.

H. Goutorbe 'Cuvée Prestige' Premier Cru. $39.98. Very Good. **Best value (tie)**. Nutty, with brioche and yeast. Big yet well-balanced, flavorful but not heavy. Dottie called this "a wine of conviction."

Pierre Moncuit 'Hugues de Coulmet' Blanc de Blancs. $39.98. Very Good. **Best value (tie)**. Somewhat more rustic than some, with more earthiness and plenty of yeast, mushrooms and minerals, giving it nice weight. Real presence.

José Dhondt Blanc de Blancs. $51.99. Delicious. Everything is right even before a taste—wonderful little bubbles, golden color and a mouthwatering nose of yeast, lemon and a little bit of funk. Nice citrus and some guts. Especially good with food. Complete.

L. Aubry Fils 'Le Nombre d'Or Campaniae Veteres Vites' 2003. $64.99. Very Good. Elegant and highly personal, with yeast and mushrooms on the nose. Complex and restrained. Be prepared for something different.

Chartogne-Taillet 'Fiacre' Tête de Cuvée 2002. $69. Good/Very Good. John thought this was a bit clumsy, but Dottie liked its lemony acidity, earthiness, nuttiness and brown sugar. "It just tastes good," she said.

José Michel & Fils 'Tradition.' $29.99. Good/Very Good. Great toast on the nose, along with ripe lemon and some orange zest. Lighter than many, but all of the tastes are there, with a special ease about it.

Marc Hebrart Premier Cru Blanc de Blancs. $49.99. Good/Very Good. Plenty of rich, almost chewy fruit sets it apart, with a finish that's so clean and fresh it's like Champagne sorbet.

Pierre Peters 'Cuvée de Réserve' Grand Cru Blanc de Blancs. $45.97. Good/Very Good. Lemony, with some honey underneath, along with some brown sugar and a fetching, biscotti-like nose. Gets richer, deeper with some air and warmth. Longtime favorite.

Note: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges from Yech to OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at stores in New Jersey and New York.

All I want for Christmas

This year's batch of holiday music is...odd

By Jim Fusilli

Do you know anyone who's crazy for Christmas albums by rock and pop artists? Me neither. In my crowd, the reaction is closer to ho-hum than ho-ho-ho. But somebody must enjoy them. The benefit series that began in 1987 with "A Very Special Christmas" is the most successful in music history, raising more than $100 million for the Special Olympics. Mariah Carey's "Merry Christmas," released in 1994, has sold about 10 million copies world-wide. Josh Groban's "Noël" was the best-selling album of 2007, with some 3.5 million copies, though it was available only for the last 10 weeks of that year.

Few other Christmas albums have found such mass acceptance, yet each year they arrive by the sackful beginning in late summer, the impetus being, I suppose, the hope for that rare breakout hit and the knowledge that the albums can succeed as impulse holiday buys for rock- or pop-music fans. Most aren't very good. But more later on Bob Dylan's new "Christmas in the Heart."

Christmas albums by rock and pop stars have been around a long time—Elvis Presley recorded his first one in 1957, and "A Christmas Gift for You From Phil Spector" was released on the day of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. The number of Christmas albums released by rock and pop stars is in the thousands by now. The Beatles made a big deal out of Christmas, sending an annual recording of season's greetings to their fans, and James Brown cut several Christmas albums. But the Rolling Stones didn't make one. (That cover of Chuck Berry's "Run Rudolph Run" was a solo effort by Keith Richards.) There's no Led Zeppelin Christmas album, but you can get a holiday tribute to Metallica by Santa Claws and the Naughty but Nice Orchestra. So far, no Christmas album by Radiohead. But can't you just see Coldplay doing one?

Seems we've had better luck in the long run with rock and pop Christmas singles than albums, starting with Bing Crosby's 1942 version of Irving Berlin's "White Christmas," still the best marriage of singer and a new holiday song. The bluesy "Merry Christmas, Baby" was first released by Johnny Moore's Three Blazers in 1947, four decades before Bruce Springsteen covered it. "Jingle Bell Rock" by Bobby Helm came out in 1957; Brenda Lee's "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree," a year later. Burl Ives's bright, bouncy version of "A Holly Jolly Christmas," this year's best-selling holiday single according to Billboard magazine, was introduced in 1964. Released in 1984, "Do They Know It's Christmas?" by Band-Aid, which featured Bono, Sting, Bob Geldorf and a squadron of British and Irish rock stars, still sounds pretty good.

Every now and then, along comes a Christmas song that's great music but doesn't quite evoke community and the glow of good cheer. In his "Another Lonely Christmas," Prince sings "Remember the time we swam naked in your father's pool?" "That Was the Worst Christmas Ever!" from Sufjan Stevens's lovely "Songs for Christmas" is a tune about an abusive father that will drive you to lace the eggnog with something stronger than brandy. I confess to a special place in my heart for the Pogues' "Fairytale of New York," in which the narrator spends Christmas in a drunk tank, but it's a glorious mess.

Photo illustration by Mick Coulas; photos: Getty Images (3), Zuma Press (Dylan)

For some artists, cutting a Christmas album is a chance to add a little wit and diversity to their catalog. Thus, we get heavy-metal Christmas, reggae Christmas, punk Christmas, zydeco Christmas, lounge Christmas and rap Christmas—there's nothing quite like hearing "The Little Drummer Boy" where all the percussion is played by drum machines. Artists who stay close to Christmas traditions and yet mark the classics with their own stamp tend to offer cloying versions slathered with sentimentality, as if we need to be coated in honey to remember that Christmas is the time of year to celebrate faith and cherish family and friends. Kenny G has issued five holiday recordings, the first of which, "Miracles: The Holiday Album," released in 1994, is the best-selling Christmas album in the U.S. since Nielsen SoundScan began tracking sales in 1991. Celine Dion's "These Are Special Times" runs a close second to Mr. G's "Miracles."

This year's batch is a particularly odd lot. Unless you think nothing says sleigh bells and mistletoe like Neil Diamond, "A Cherry Cherry Christmas" may not be for you, though his burly reading of Adam Sandler's "The Chanukah Song" is fairly priceless. "A Very Special Christmas 7" seems aimed at fifth graders with Vanessa Hudgens, Leighton Meester, Ashley Tisdale and Miley Cyrus "as Hannah Montana" among the performers. REO Speedwagon—remember them?—released "Not So Silent Night," which is probably the year's strangest way to stage a comeback.

The new one by Andrea Bocelli, he of the magnificent voice and the dreadful taste in pop music, offers "My Christmas," produced and arranged by David Foster and featuring guest appearances by Mary J. Blige, the Muppets, Reba McEntire and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. (What, no duet with a death-metal act?) It's this year's top-selling holiday album and is so overwrought and saccharine that it's likely to become a holiday staple. Sting's "If on a Winter's Night" and Tori Amos's "Midwinter Graces" both include Christmas songs, but neither declares itself a Christmas album, which may say something about the reputation of the genre.

As for Mr. Dylan's "Christmas in the Heart," which benefits Feeding America and other programs to combat hunger: He's been getting killed by people who demand artistic significance at all times from him and praised by those who think everything he does is precious, which, of course, devalues his best efforts. But Mr. Dylan's work has been spotty for a while now and he's long displayed a sense of humor in his music—which pretty much should cover any reasonable reaction to the album. "Christmas in the Heart" isn't high art and a few of the songs—the Tex-Mex "Must Be Santa" and "Here Comes Santa," among them—are a hoot, though apparently not to everyone. Wrote one reviewer on Amazon: "Forced to sit through it again I might very well have to hang myself by the chimney with care." How anybody could act like Scrooge about a rock or pop artist's Christmas album is beyond me.

Top, every year new Christmas albums arrive by the sackful; below, Bob Dylan, Andrea Bocelli, Miley Cyrus and Neil Diamond perform on holiday albums this season.

Two for the books

'Wild Things' and 'Mr. Fox' have fun with their source materials

By Joe Morgenstern

"Where the Wild Things Are" honors the book in every imaginable way, and in ways no one could have imagined until Spike Jonze and his collaborators came along. Maurice Sendak's beloved classic of children's literature, a tale told in mysteriously droll illustrations and 338 words, has grown into a movie that feels vast in scope, yet remarkably intimate and tender. And little Max, the willful kid in the wolf suit, has found his flawless embodiment in a boy whose real name happens to be Max Records. Like the hero of the book, this Max projects a fantasy world from his yearnings, fears and anger. But the movie invests those projections with such intense and genuine wildness as to make their creator a veritable Wizard of Id.

The filmmaker, Mr. Jonze, has done only two features until now, "Being John Malkovich" and "Adaptation." Both were strikingly original, marvelously intricate and notably erratic in their plot and structure. They made him an exciting choice to direct this one, though also a risky choice, since the Sendak book is essentially plotless. (Boy misbehaves, boy's unseen mother sends him to bed without supper, boy's room becomes a forest populated by bizarre creatures who make him king and do his bidding until he feels hungry for love and heads back home.) Happily—and improbably, given the potential for outraging whole generations of readers—the risks have been managed by taking greater risks, and some brave ones.

This adaptation, by the director and his celebrated co-writer, Dave Eggers, makes Max a somewhat older (maybe 8 or 9) and much angrier child than the original—all that wildness doesn't come from nowhere—as well as a wrenchingly vulnerable child whose adventures are elaborately rooted in his everyday life. His mother is not only seen but powerfully felt: Catherine Keener, an actress of unforced warmth and uncommon humor, has never been so affecting, even when this loving mom vents ample anger in her turn. (Mark Ruffalo appears briefly as her boyfriend.)

After establishing Max's sensitivity and loneliness with a few deft strokes, the movie makes him a more active protagonist than the boy of the book. Instead of staying in his room until the wild things appear, he runs, boats, struggles to stay afloat during a terrifying storm, sinks, swims and finally marches up the beach of his subconscious with a heedless resolve that's perfectly reflective of his hurt and anger, and guaranteed to get him into unmanageable trouble.

I have no idea how Mr. Jonze elicited the performance we see on the screen. Directors often trick, cajole, surprise, bribe or badger child actors into doing what they want them to do, but you have no sense of that here. There's a nearly eerie purity to Max Records's responses, whether his alter Max is impressing monsters in his grandiosity mode ("I have power from another land. From ancient times. Don't make me show you."); choosing up sides in a wild rumpus to come ("I'll be on my own side. By myself."); screeching an order for the rumpus to begin (what a charming old word that is, and what a grand screech the kid gives); smiling a smile of serene pleasure from the cozy bottom of a monster pile (the movie captures the childhood magic of safely enveloping spaces), or, as his pretend power comes up against the reality of dream logic and warring factions emerge, trying to solve the problem that's blighting his young life: "How do I make everyone OK?"

The truth, of course, is that he can't. He can't make his mother happy, can't fix whatever's wrong with his family, can't bring back his absent father (who has given him the world in the form of a plastic globe), can't comprehend the conflicts of that world until he gets older, can't be someone he is not. To bring him to an understanding of who he is—his fully sufficient and much-loved self—the movie dramatizes the book's psychological subtext with an assortment of wild things that leap from the Sendak designs into joyous, boisterous life. And the marvels they represent don't stop at the techniques—live action, animatronics, digital animation—that set them in motion. They're given voice by a superb cast that includes James Gandolfini, Lauren Ambrose, Forest Whitaker, Catherine O'Hara, Chris Cooper and Paul Dano.

The wild things represent an unavoidable risk, since they're obliged to evoke the creatures of a book that is, by now, almost half a century old. Will today's media-saturated kids look on them as quaint imitations of monsters they've known, if not loved, on the big screen and TV? That remains to be seen. What seems certain is that the physical and vocal music of the wild things—the glorious music on the sound track was written by Karen O and Carter Burwell—will strike a deep chord with filmgoers who've read the book to their children, or who remember having had it read to them. (As I write this I can almost hear, across the decades, a chorus of parents, including me, acting out the run-on sentences with reassuring silliness: "The wild things roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and....")

Of the risks taken electively, the most conspicuous is a rebirth scene that's closer to Jung than Sendak (notwithstanding the author's debt to psychoanalytic wisdom); while some may scoff, I found the scene shockingly beautiful. But then the boldest risk was expanding on Maurice Sendak in the first place, and it pays off handsomely—not only with the emotional resonance of such wish-fulfilling inventions as good and bad mother figures and a father figure who swings from loving to disparaging and back to loving in the end, but with such gentle touches as Max's secret anxiety about the health of the sun, which, his teacher tells the class, will eventually go dark.

A few sequences are dark, too, while a very few others may frighten young children (or not; it's hard to overestimate how blasé some kids have become). For the most part, however, "Where the Wild Things Are" is suffused with the glow of Lance Acord's cinematography, and with the brightness of Casey Storm's costumes, K.K. Barrett's production design (never has so much been owed to so many twigs) and Spike Jonze's ever-graceful direction. As wish-fulfillments go, this is a movie lover's dream.

Below, a scene from 'Where the Wild Things Are'; left, 'Fantastic Mr. Fox'

Warner Bros. Pictures ('Wild'); Fox Searchlight Pictures ('Fox')

'Fantastic Mr. Fox'

Life is full of surprises. The best one I've had in a good while is "Fantastic Mr. Fox," Wes Anderson's stop-action animated version of the classic children's novel by Roald Dahl. Who could have guessed—certainly not me—that animation and Mr. Anderson, most recently the director of "The Darjeeling Limited," would be an inspired, and mutually inspiring, match? Instead of the vapid motion-capture process of "A Christmas Carol," he and his collaborators give us a captivating entertainment for the holiday season and well beyond.

The script, which the director wrote with Noah Baumbach, takes elaborate liberties with its source material. Now the bane of three farmers' existence is a bushy-tailed newspaper columnist voiced by George Clooney. (His wife, voiced by Meryl Streep, had been urging him to stop stealing birds and find a new line of work.) If that sounds precious or improbable, the film is all of that and more, the more being foxily funny. The visual style is a radical departure from the original Quentin Blake illustrations, but a hugely endearing one that's rendered in exotic colors, stuffed with more details than a Richard Scarry page and popping with zestful inventions.

So who's the film's audience? The voice cast alone should be a draw for adults—not just Mr. Clooney, who gives a commanding (no kidding) comic performance, but Ms. Streep, Bill Murray, Michael Gambon, Willem Dafoe, Jason Schwartzman, Owen Wilson; they're all delightful in their respective ways. And the look of the film should enchant kids who may be too young to savor the sophisticated script. All I can say for certain is that I didn't expect to be the audience for this lovely oddity, but I was.

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University Museum and Art Gallery ('Shadow'); Tamotsu Fujii (phone); Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands (van Gogh)

Hong Kong

CONCERT

Za Ondekoza: This ensemble has been spreading the gospel of taiko—Japanese drumming, to oversimplify matters—for 40 years now, much of it on foot, late founder Den Tagayasu having believed that "music and running are one." So while touring the U.S. from 1990 to 1993, for example, the members piled up about 14,900 kilometers, and after Mr. Tagayasu died in 2001, the group ran from Sado to Mt. Fuji—600 kilometers—giving three memorial concerts along the way.

Yuen Long Theatre, 9 Yuen Long Tai Yuk Rd., New Territories; Dec. 11, 7:30 p.m.; Hong Kong Cultural Centre, 10 Salisbury Rd., Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon; Dec. 13, 7:30 p.m. Admission: HK$100 to HK$250 (Dec. 11); HK$100 to HK$380 (Dec. 13).
☎ 852-2111-5999
Web: www.urbtix.hk

EXHIBITION

Images of a Great Nation: Actually two exhibitions, or even three. One introduces landscape and peasant-life photos by Joseph C.K. Yeung, some with touches of painted colors or poetic inscriptions, and the other is a two-part show offering more than 200 works by members of the Greater China Photographic Society (covering the mainland, Taiwan, Macau and Hong Kong) on a theme of capturing the beauty of their hometowns. The first part will be exhibited until January, and the second part from then until March.

The University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 94 Bonham Rd.; to Jan. 10 (Yeung) and March 14 (Society), 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Saturday, 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday. Free admission.
☎ 852-2241-5500
Web: www.hku.hk/hkumag

Singapore

MUSICAL

High School Musical—Summer Celebration: Disney extracts further value from its "High School Musical" franchise with a live show featuring more than 15 songs and dances from the three movies, among them "We're All in This Together" from HSM 1, "Fabulous" from HSM 2 and "Can I Have This Dance?" from HSM 3 ("Senior Year"). Besides being able to sing along or even dance on their own, audience members may be invited onto the stage to dance.

Singapore Indoor Stadium, 2 Stadium Walk; Dec. 13, 3 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.; Dec. 13, 2 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. Admission: S$25 to S$65.
☎ 65-6348-5555
Web: www.sistic.com

Taipei

EXHIBITION

Van Gogh—The Flaming Soul: Ahead of the 120th anniversary of his death (next July), the artist finally gets his first solo exhibition in Taiwan. Van Gogh had just 10 years to create art, but left more than 800 paintings and 1,200 drawings. The exhibition offers 98 of them—21 oil paintings and 77 drawings, some seldom seen—nearly all from the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands, and including its great jewel, "Country Road in Provence by Night," a painting also known as "Road with Cypress and Star."

National Museum of History, 49 Nan Hai Rd.; to March 28, Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission: NT$30.
☎ 886-2-2361-0270
Web: www.nmh.gov.tw

Tokyo

EXHIBITION

The Outline—The Unseen Outline of Things: A two-man collaborative show, with 118 pieces by product designer Naoto Fukasawa and 65 pictures of Fukasawa designs by advertising photographer Tamotsu Fujii. The pursuit is "outline of design," described as obvious yet invisible. Mr. Fukasawa says of Mr. Fujii's work, "He's captured both my designs and the air that surrounds them." Says Mr. Fujii, "I take photographs as though I were looking at a piece of scenery or at a sculpture."

2121 Design Sight, 9-7-6 Akasaka, Minato-ku; to Jan. 31, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.; closed Tuesdays. Admission: 1,000 yen.
☎ 81-3-3475-2121
Web: www.2121designsight.jp

Hong Kong: 'Shadow of Light in Hong Kong,' by Yau Wai-keung; Tokyo: KDDI Infobar 2 mobile phone, designed by Naoto Fukasawa; Taipei: 'Country Road in Provence by Night,' by van Gogh

Tour: Asia

CONCERT

Guns 'n' Roses: In one sense the U.S. hard-rock band has been around for nearly 25 years, which would be remarkable considering the continual tumult. But given that former members now number about 15, with guitarist Robin Finck just recently replaced by DJ Ashba, it's truer to say that what has been around for 25 years is the band name, owned by Axl Rose, the one constant (Tracii Guns is long, long gone). Well, after all, the band's first album was titled "Appetite for Destruction." When the latest album, "Chinese Democracy," came out last spring, it ended a 16-year album drought. Indeed, it had been 10 years since Guns 'n' Roses released as much as a new song. But here they are.

Seoul: Olympic Park Gymnastics Arena, Olympic Park, 88-2 Bangi-dong, Songpa-gu; Dec. 13, 7 p.m. Admission: 110,000 won to 132,000 won.
☎ 82-2-1544-1555
Web: ticket.interpark.com
Osaka: Kyocera Dome, 3-2-1 Chiyozaki, Nishi-ku; Dec. 16, 7 p.m. Admission: 6,000 yen to 12,500 yen.
☎ 81-6-6362-7301
Web: www.hip-osaka.co.jp
Tokyo: Tokyo Dome, 1-3-61 Korakuen, Bunkyo-ku; Dec. 19, 6 p.m. Admission 6,000 yen to 12,500 yen.
☎ 81-3-3475-9999
Web: t.pia.jp/music/ygk/index.html

Tour: China

DANCE

Riverdance: A farewell tour, with four companies—each named for an Irish river—putting on "Riverdance" all over the globe. In the 15 years or so since the wider world first saw a line of Irish men and women dancing without moving their arms, the sight has gradually become less frightening. That's just a small part of this show, which uses music and dance to trace Irish history from way back—stops include the Bronze Age, with a lone piper mourning the mythical hero Cú Chulainn, and the 19th-century famine that helped drive the Irish to the New World. This tour, by the Bann Company, also includes stops in Wuhan, Shenzhen, Suzhou and Nanjing.

Guangzhou: Guangzhou Baiyun International Convention Center, 1039 Baiyun Ave. South, Baiyun District; Dec. 15 to 20, 8 p.m. Admission: 180 yuan to 1,280 yuan.
☎ 86-20-8776-8558
Web: en.piao.com.cn/guangzhou
Shanghai: Shanghai Grand Theatre-Lyric Theatre, Renmin Da Dao; Jan. 5 to 8, 7:15 p.m.; Jan. 9 and 10, 2 p.m. and 7:15 p.m. Admission: 280 yuan to 1,680 yuan.
☎ 86-21-6217-2426
Web: www.culture.sh.cn
Beijing: Beijing Exhibition Theater, 135 Xizhimenwai St., Xicheng District; Feb. 5 to 11, 7:30 p.m. Admission: 180 yuan to 1,680 yuan.
☎ 86-10-6417-7845
Web: www.piao.com.cn

Masterpiece / *By Roy J. Harris Jr.*

The Best-Selling Record of All

It was a peaceful song that became a wartime classic. Its unorthodox, melancholy melody—and mere 54 words, expressing the simple yearning for a return to happier times—sounded instantly familiar when sung by America's favorite crooner. But 67 years after its introduction, some still are surprised to learn that Bing Crosby's recording of the Irving Berlin ballad "White Christmas" became not only the runaway smash-hit for the World War II holidays, but the best-selling record of all time.

> 'White Christmas' and the reason it endures

Such unrivaled success reflects everything from record-industry trends to the sweep of global history. But it all begins with the songwriting genius of a Russian immigrant, born Israel Baline, who had just turned 54 when Decca recorded the track on May 29, 1942, and already had to his credit hundreds of hits like "Alexander's Ragtime Band," "Blue Skies," "How Deep Is the Ocean?" and "God Bless America." Equally brilliant, though, was Berlin's insistence that "White Christmas" be introduced by the internationally popular Crosby. Perfectly suited to the casual, romantic style of the then-39-year-old, Berlin's lyric and tune blended the message, about longing for past Christmases, with suggestions of a love song, resonating with families being separated by war.

"'White Christmas' is an icon that transcends analysis for me. It has the simplicity that Berlin always tried to imbue his songs with," says Michael Feinstein, among the premier interpreters of the American Songbook. But Berlin's kind of simple is anything but to the ears of some music commentators.

"We know the song so well that we barely know it at all," Slate's Jody Rosen writes in his 2002 book "White Christmas: The Story of an American Song." Berlin biographer Philip Furia believes the songwriter's lack of formal musical training—he composed mostly on the black keys of F-sharp, often transposing songs with a specially modified piano—led to songs that "subtly depart from the most fundamental tenets of songwriting." While others might have stressed "dreaming" and "Christmas," for example, "Berlin deftly emphasizes the seemingly unimportant 'I'm' with a whole note, then races over the other syllables" before the next whole note, "white."

Rob Kapilow, playing as he is interviewed, notes how "White Christmas" eschews the usual "bridge": the countervailing melody normally following a song's first 16 measures. Berlin's opening bars "take you up the scale of yearning in their chords," and repeating them immediately heightens the impact. "Hear the minor chords for 'listen' and 'glisten'?" asks Mr. Kapilow, known for his "What Makes It Great?" lecture series. "It's heartbreaking."

Exactly where and when Berlin composed "White Christmas" is a mystery, because he offered varying accounts. He wrote in his New York and Beverly Hills homes and in hotels, often depositing songs in what he called "the trunk" for later use. "White Christmas" started as escapist Depression-era fare—a mournful satire for a Broadway review. The song's introductory verse, expunged by Berlin from some early sheet music, and infrequently performed today, places the singer in "Beverly Hills, L.A.," "longing to be up North." (The verse, Mr. Feinstein notes, "weakens the impact by forcing the listener to interpret things in a certain way.")

Berlin finally pulled "White Christmas" from the trunk for the movie "Holiday Inn," in which Crosby and Fred Astaire tell a story through a calendar full of songs. During production, though, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Crosby gave its first public performance—unheralded and unrecorded—on his Dec. 24, 1941, "Kraft Music Hall" radio program. The Decca 78 rpm wasn't released until just before the film's September premiere, as American recruits streamed overseas, many to snowless Pacific climes.

Randy Jones

"Songs make history, and history makes songs," Berlin told an interviewer weeks before Decca's recording, suggesting that he expected good things for "White Christmas." (He once bragged that it was not only "the best song I ever wrote, it's the best song anybody ever wrote.") Still, he later conceded that the extent of its success shocked him. Irving Berlin Music Co., which collects royalties for his heirs, won't discuss totals. But a spokesman says he's "comfortable" saying that "Crosby's single is the best-selling record of all time." Guinness World Records puts its sales at more than 50 million copies, with album and other sales taking the total above 100 million.

Berlin had worried how "Holiday Inn" would showcase the song—reportedly hiding behind a set to observe Crosby singing it to co-star Marjorie Reynolds. He paid scant attention to orchestra leader John Scott Trotter's rendition with Crosby, backed by the Ken Darby Singers. In the 1940s, though, partly because of the war, radio broadcasting turned from live to recorded music. Disc jockeys, playing Crosby's "White Christmas" repeatedly, fueled demand for 78s to mail overseas.

Longing for Christmas snowfall was hardly a common image before Berlin's song. And Christmas carols, not secular songs, dominated the seasonal music scene. (After the success of "White Christmas," songwriters followed with similarly wistful hits, including "I'll Be Home for Christmas" and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.")

What had inspired Berlin? As a Jewish youth in Brooklyn, he experienced Christmas as an outsider, at neighbors' homes. Some biographers suggest that the death of his infant son, Irving Jr., from a heart ailment on Christmas Eve 1928 sharpened his sad holiday associations. But Berlin loved Christmastime, hating only how his film work often made for holidays away from his family back East. In 1937 a movie-industry friend surprised him with a short film designed to cheer him. Shot in advance, it pictured Berlin's family waving to him from a wintry home, as snow fell outside. Mr. Furia suspects that Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" also might have influenced him, since the poem and song both use "the simplest of rhymes and barest of imagery to evoke a beautiful but melancholy scene." Jody Rosen writes that Berlin owes a debt to the poignant American "Home Songs" of Stephen Foster.

Whatever Berlin's inspiration, Mr. Kapilow figures that the power of repetition in the war years laid the groundwork for its later success. Carl Sandburg may have explained that early popularity best in an article marking Pearl Harbor's first anniversary: "We have learned to be a little sad and a little lonesome, without being sickly about it. This feeling is caught in the song of a thousand juke boxes and the tune whistled in streets and homes, 'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas.' When we sing that song we don't hate anybody. . . . Away down under, this latest hit of Irving Berlin catches us where we love peace."

Mr. Harris is a journalist and author in Hingham, Mass.

Bookshelf / *By Albert Pyle*

A Few Clues From a Master

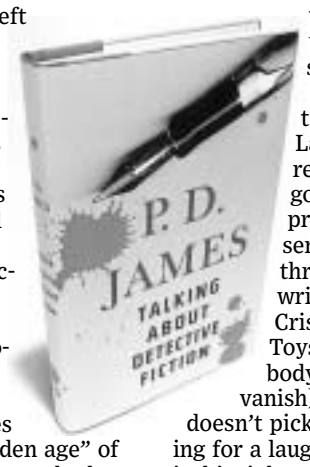
About to enter her 10th decade, Baroness James of Holland Park—known as P.D. James to millions of readers—steps back from writing her own suave, thoughtful detective novels to discuss the entire genre: what makes detective novels work, why they are so broadly appealing and which authors have written the best ones over the years. "Talking About Detective Fiction" is a short book, but it has heft, and little wonder, given Lady James's literary mastery and deep familiarity with her subject.

Talking About Detective Fiction
By P.D. James
(Knopf, 198 pages, $22)

P.D. James fits into the select group of British writers who long supported themselves by working at nonwriting jobs, a set that includes the postal employee Anthony Trollope and the civil servant C.P. Snow. Lady James spent three decades in the trenches of the British civil service, including stints at the criminal-law and police departments of the Home Office. The experience seems to have given her an understanding of cops, suspects and victims as real people leading real lives. And her long-ago instruction at the excellent Cambridge High School (no university degree—take that, A.S. Byatt!) apparently instilled in her an admirably precise prose style. Her literary sensibility—calm observation and exact description—is on ample display in "Talking About Detective Fiction."

In an opening chapter that brings in both Trollope and Charles Dickens, Lady James sends the reader speeding to the Austen shelf to pull down "the most interesting example of a mainstream novel which is also a detective story." That would be "Emma," Jane Austen's tale of the young, self-appointed matchmaker Emma Woodhouse, who is not as clever as she thinks. What is the secret in the novel? The "unrecognized relationships" between characters caught up in Emma's romantic machinations, says Lady James, adding: "The story is confined to a closed society in a rural setting, which was to become common in detective fiction, and Jane Austen deceives us with cleverly constructed clues."

Then it's on to Wilkie Collins, whose "The Moonstone" (1868)—about the theft of a diamond and attempts to solve the crime—gets her vote for being the first detective novel. Next is a chapter on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown, the cleric-detective in "The Blue Cross" and dozens of other short stories. The Victorian groundwork having been laid, Lady James moves on to the "golden age" of detective fiction, commonly defined as the era between the world wars. She notes, though, that one work generally regarded as a golden-age classic was published in 1913: E.C. Bentley's "Trent's Last Case," about an amateur sleuth's investigation of the murder of a financier at his country house. Bentley meant the book as a genre satire—Trent falls in love with the widow, and he doesn't solve the crime—but it ended up being vastly admired for its innovations by other detective-fiction writers. Lady James thinks that the book ushered in the great stuff.



If there is anything missing from Lady James's carefully respectful take on the golden age, it is an appreciation of the great sense of fun that comes through in the work of writers such as Edmund Crispin ("The Moving Toyshop," about a dead body in a toyshop—both vanish). But then one doesn't pick up P.D. James looking for a laugh. There's psychological insight aplenty, but no police jokes.

Lady James is at her most surgically analytical in discussing "Four Formidable Women," authors who were known as the "queens of crime" during the golden age. Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie will be familiar to many; they are linked with Margery Allingham, whose aristocratic detective Albert Campion solved mysteries from the 1930s to the 1960s, and Ngaio Marsh, who wove her interest in the theater and art into her tales about investigations by detective Roderick Alleyn. Taking a cool, clear look at the quartet as storytellers and illustrators of social history, Lady James pays homage to their craftsmanship but scrupulously notes such shortcomings as Christie's lack of psychological credibility and Marsh's persistent if forgivable snobbery.

In the final chapter, "Today and a Glimpse of Tomorrow," Lady James politely ignores the growing plague of recipe-based and chatty, dilettante-driven whodunits, focusing instead on the increase in psychological and social realism. She notes approvingly the concern for rendering believable portraits of people at work and play in modern detective fiction. As well she might. It is a realm she mastered and over which she graciously reigns.

Mr. Pyle is the executive director of the Mercantile Library in Cincinnati.

Stanley Tucci takes on the sunny and the dark

His roles span adoring Julia Child to playing a child killer

By Michelle Kung

Contour/Getty Images

A veteran of film, television and theater, actor Stanley Tucci has played his share of quirky characters. This year, he's gone to extremes. In "Julie & Julia," he played an adoring husband to Meryl Streep's Julia Child; but in "The Lovely Bones," Peter Jackson's adaptation of Alice Sebold's 2002 novel that had its premiere last month and will open widely in January, he stars as a pedophile who murders a 14-year-old girl. Mr. Tucci, who has three children and whose wife died of cancer this year, talks about the challenges of the role.

How did you decide to take on this part of a rapist and murderer?

I really trusted Peter [Jackson] and his wife, Fran. In the original draft of the script that I read, that scene was more graphic. In the film, everything is left to your imagination, which is how it should be—it makes everything so much more scary and more interesting. Also, much of the movie was shooting in Pennsylvania, so I knew I could take a train and commute home to see my family [in upstate New York]. I also brought my family when we shot in New Zealand. I don't think I could have done the part if I had been by myself.

Even though Saoirse Ronan, who plays the young girl, is a professional actor, did you have to gauge how much you could push her emotionally?

Yes, because it's scary material and she's a kid. As a parent, after every take, I'd ask her if she was OK, and she would do the same thing to me. I begged Pete to shoot in one day, but we ended up needing a day and a half. And it was at the end of the shoot, so I had to wait five months to shoot it. Once it was done, I felt so free. I like to joke a lot, and I think it's vital for something like this.

Has talking about this film been cathartic for you in your personal life?

It's hard for me. My wife passed away seven months ago and I don't want to think about the afterlife. I don't believe in that sort of thing. It'd be nice, if it were there. Woody Allen has that great quote where he says he doesn't believe in an afterlife, although he's bringing a change of underwear. That's how I feel.

You shot "Julie & Julia" immediately after this film, which must have been a relief.

That film was the antidote to this one, and was exactly what I needed to do. I stayed at home, worked with Meryl, laughed a ton and made martinis every night. We're like two children together and laugh all the time, which is why we get along so well. Plus, she's completely fearless as an actress.

In the spring, you'll be making your debut as a theater director on "Lend Me a Tenor." How did the project come about?

I've done plays all my life and the Araca Group, the guys who did "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune" [with Mr. Tucci in 2002], have been after me to do another, but I couldn't. I have three little kids and that play almost killed me. I hate the schedule and I don't believe in eight shows a week. But directing is different. And this play is hilarious. All of the cheap gags that you find in farces are in this one farce. I would go crazy just being an actor. That's why I started writing and directing. I don't like being at the mercy of people I don't like or trust.

Coming up for Mr. Tucci: directing a stage farce that's 'full of cheap gags'

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